

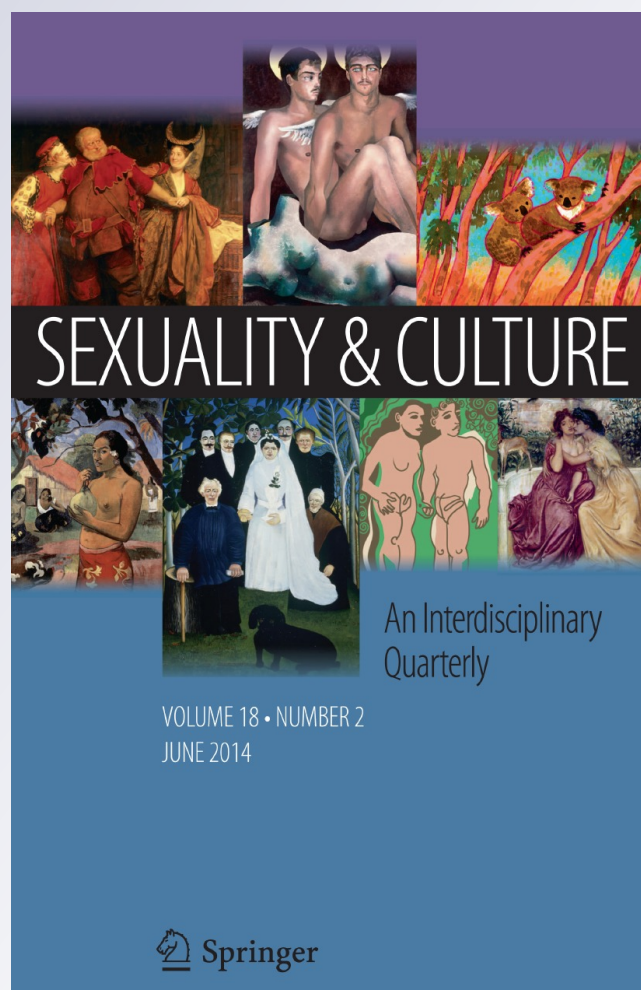
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and Behavior Among Adolescents in an  
LGBT Youth Center*

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## “How Do I Know I Am Gay?”: Understanding Sexual Orientation, Identity and Behavior Among Adolescents in an LGBT Youth Center

Mary Anna Robertson

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**Abstract** Current research on sexual minority youth tends to be concentrated in the fields of public health, social work, and psychology with a focus on psychosocial health risks that often rely on sexuality as a fixed unit of analysis. A sociological understanding of the processes that drive an individual to identify as gay in the first place makes an important contribution to this existing body of literature, allowing an opportunity to understand not just how sexual minority youth are vulnerable, but why. Drawing on my ethnographic research with adolescent males who frequent a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth drop-in center, I demonstrate how sexuality gets constructed through four processes: violating compulsory heterosexuality, seeking an explanation, exploring sexuality, and negotiating identity. I will show how individuals make meaning of their sexual selves within the context of a patriarchal, heteronormative structural system, where symbols of homophobia and masculinity inform their identity development, and how that reiterates heteronormative development. I conclude by drawing attention to how the shifting boundaries of queerness should inform efforts to improve conditions for sexual minority youth and inform future research.

**Keywords** LGBT youth · Sexual minority youth · Adolescent sexuality · Youth drop-in centers · Sexuality · Compulsory heterosexuality · Queer theory

### Introduction

Sexuality continues to be a powerful tool for forming social boundaries and therefore the origin and development of sexual orientation, behavior, and identity

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are matters of interest among scholars. Adolescence is a particularly interesting moment for exploring sexual development because it is the moment of the life-course most associated with sexual awakening and the experiences of youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer—sexual minority youth—provide a particularly unique glimpse of the early stages of sexuality development. Through the coming out stories of adolescent males who frequent a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth drop-in center, I attempt to answer the question, “How do I know I am gay?” I will show how the boys in my study make meaning of their sexual selves within the context of a patriarchal, heteronormative structural system, where symbols of homophobia and masculinity inform their identity development, and how that reiterates heteronormative development. The larger purpose of my discussion is to demonstrate how this process contributes to what Duggan (2003) calls the “new homonormativity” (p. 50) of the mainstream LGBT rights movement; a movement whose agenda too often results in firming up rather than neutralizing the boundaries between normality and queerness.

Research on sexual minority youth tends to be concentrated in the fields of public health, social work, and psychology, where research questions are often concerned with vulnerability to psycho-social health issues like sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Voisin et al. 2013), school climate and bullying (Birkett et al. 2009; Kosciw et al. 2009; Murdock and Bolch 2005), sexual assault and abuse or commercial sexual exploitation (Curtis et al. 2008; Roberts et al. 2012), and suicidal and non-suicidal self injury (D’Augelli et al. 2001; Eliason 2011; Walls et al. 2010; Mcdermott et al. 2008). While important contributions to understanding the vulnerability of queer youth, concern for the health and safety of this population has resulted in research agendas that overemphasize risk and underemphasize the socially constructed nature of sexual identities. A sociological understanding of the processes that drive an individual to identify as gay makes an important contribution to this existing body of literature, allowing an opportunity to understand not just how sexual minority youth are vulnerable, but why.

In their review of research on sexuality development in adolescence from the first decade of the twenty-first century, Tolman and McClelland (2009) celebrate the shift from risk-specific research on adolescent sexuality to research that recognizes adolescent sexuality as a normal part of development. They point to three areas of research that surged in the early part of the new century which include new views on sexual behavior, sexual selfhood, and sexual socialization. Recognizing the overlapping nature of these categories, this article is less about sexual behavior and instead contributes primarily to ideas about sexual selfhood as well as shines light on some processes of sexual socialization. In many ways my findings resemble previous studies on the processes of sexual minority identity formation among adults (Dank 1971; Troiden 1979; Weinberg 1978; Weinberg et al. 1994), and while my contribution enriches the relevance of these earlier works it is unique both because of its focus on youths and its incorporation of queer theory. Further, it fills two important gaps in the literature on adolescent sexualities in that it uses qualitative methodology and focuses on adolescent males.

This research led me to identify four processes of sexual identity formation. First, by *violating compulsory heterosexuality* (Rich 1980), the youths are marked as

different from ostensibly “normal” or heterosexual youth. Second, upon being marked, the youths *seek out an explanation* for their “difference,” looking for words and tools that name their difference. Third, the youths describe *exploring sexuality* where they are introduced to other gay and bisexual individuals and subsequently learn how to fit in with the LGBT community. Finally, the youths *negotiate their identity* by oscillating between various sexual identities, picking an identity that fits them, and exploring how their sexual identity is constructed in tandem with their racial, class, and religious identities. After describing the research setting and methodology used, I review sociological theories on sexuality, I then present a detailed discussion of my data within the context of the four processes mentioned above, finally I will show how attention to the shifting boundaries of queerness should inform both efforts to improve conditions for sexual minority youth and future research.

### Setting and Methodology

Spectrum, founded in 1998, welcomes any youth between the ages of 13 and 22 who identify as LGBT, and their allies. In addition to being a safe drop-in space, Spectrum has developed daily programming which ranges from art and poetry workshops, to sex education and community organizing sessions as well as a monthly drag show. Spectrum provides snacks, music, access to computers and the internet, health services, counseling and referral, and other resources for youth. Youth empowerment is central to its mission; therefore, it employs a youth-adult partnership model of service delivery. Youth leaders are trained in peer-based support, safe sex education and HIV prevention. Spectrum is run by two full-time adult staff, part-time undergraduate and graduate student interns from the fields of social work and human services, adult volunteers, and peer staff/volunteers and operates under the supervision of The Resource, an umbrella organization that provides a wide variety of services to adults in the LGBT community.

My entrée into the field was via a colleague who has been volunteering in the space for almost a decade. I volunteered at Spectrum over the course of 16 months, which gave me time to build trust with the youth, staff, interns, and volunteers and led to the development of my research project. After Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval, over the course of approximately 12 months I did participant observation two to three times a week and also conducted life-history interviews with youths in the space. Interviews began with questions about Spectrum including how the interviewee had discovered Spectrum, how long they had been coming, and what they did and did not like about it. I would then ask them to tell me about their lives growing up: who raised them, what their family structure was like, where they lived, if their parents or guardians worked, stayed home, practiced religion, and more. Finally we discussed their experience with sex, including their most significant intimate and sexual relationships, the things that most influenced their sexuality, their access to sex education, and their safer sex practices.

Participants gave verbal informed consent to be interviewed and parental consent for minors was waived on the basis that seeking parental permission would create an

unreasonable risk for these particular youths, who may not have been out to their parents or guardians. Youths also gave verbal informed consent to participant observation during closed educational sessions, but I was permitted by the IRB to do participant observation without informed consent during general drop-in hours because of the nature of the setting. I employed a generic inductive qualitative model, a methodology that involves: (1) purposeful sampling; (2) inductive as opposed to deductive research process; (3) use of memos and memoing in analysis; (4) saturation signaling the end of data collection; and (5) an increasingly narrow focus during the research process (Hood 2007). This paper is based on analysis of 18 life-history interviews with cisgender<sup>1</sup> male youths and hundreds of hours of participant observation data (Table 1).

Although my data include cisgender female and transgender youths, I focus on cisgender male youths for this particular analysis for two reasons: (1) Spectrum is a space dominated by cisgender males and therefore both my interviews and participant observation are more heavily influenced by their experiences; and (2) Due to the profound impact gender has on sexuality, I cannot assume cisgender female and transgender youth experience sexuality similarly to cisgender male youth.

Spectrum is located in an urban center and predominately serves youths of lower socioeconomic status. While this fact, along with its large number of youths of

**Table 1** Demographic data of interviewees

Name	Age	Gender ID	Sexual ID	Race	Education (last completed)
Shane	20	Male	Gay	White	n/a
Ernie	21	Gender Queer	Queer	Chicano	High school; some college
Brian	21	Two Spirit	Queer (gay)	Human (Euro)	High school
Trevor	20	Male	Gay	White	High school
Matthew	21	Male	Primarily gay	White	High school; some college
Hunter	21	No preference	Gay	Mixed	High school; some college
Jamil	17	Male	Open-bisexual	Multi-racial	11th grade
Gabe	18	Androgynous	Bisexual	Native/ Hispanic	10th grade
Travon	16	Male	Queer	Black/ mixed	9th grade
Miguel	20	Male	Gay	Mexican	High school
Aaron	19	Male	Gay	Mexican-American	High school; some college
Ben	19	Male	Gay	Multi-racial	High school; some college
Alex	19	Male	Gay	White	11th grade
Anthony	17	Male	Gay	Hispanic	10th grade
Corey	18	Universal	Energy	Mutt/ mixed	11th grade
Nik	18	Male	Gay	Caucasian	11th grade
Ethan	19	Male	Straight	Biracial	9th grade
William	16	Male	Gay	Multiracial/ Black	9th grade

<sup>1</sup> Cisgender refers to someone whose sex assigned at birth corresponds with their current gender identity.

color, makes Spectrum a diverse site for research, certainly LGBT youth centers located in different kinds of communities—rural or suburban—or other kinds of youth centers in urban settings might differ significantly from what I observed.

### **Sexuality as a Socially Constructed Category**

Although sex is a biological term, sexuality is understood to be a socialized behavior that is constructed through interaction in the social world (Fausto Sterling 2000; Foucault 1990; Gagnon and Simon 1973; Rubin 1984; Stein 1989; Weeks 1985). In other words, while there are biological and physiological components to human sexuality, there exists little reliable evidence that sexual desire—be it hetero-, homo-, or bisexual—is innate (Stein 1999). Therefore, rather than deliberate the origin of eros, I am interested in exploring the processes by which individuals give meaning to their feelings of desire, as well as how the adoption of a sexual identity is often more pragmatic than romantic. To understand why this is important, it is helpful to refer to Arlene Stein's (1989) theoretical framework of drives, identities and practices, wherein she advances sexualities theory from the early studies of psychologically innate, impulsive drives, through the functionalist and symbolic interactionist understanding of identities as not naturally, but socially influenced, and finally, to her conceptual understanding of sexual practices as a macro and micro examination of the innate, the structural and the individual in combination. Therefore for the purposes of this study, I look at how these young individuals interpret their feelings of desire through their individual lived experiences and how those individual experiences are constrained by structural forces beyond their control.

Throughout this article I borrow from Savin-Williams (2005) and refer distinctly to three different modes of understanding sexuality: orientation, identity, and behavior. I use *orientation* to refer to one's desires, fantasies, and attractions towards members of the opposite sex, same sex, both or multiples sexes, or having no attraction at all. *Identity* refers to the socially constructed names and labels individuals adopt to describe themselves and/ or their sexuality, such as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, or others. *Behavior* is used to describe actual sexual and intimate acts that individuals engage in. While I understand these terms intersect with one another, I also see them as distinct. In other words, one's sexual orientation towards a particular sex or sexes does not necessarily determine that one's identity or behavior will align with that orientation, that identity is not a sure explanation for how one is orientated or what sexual behavior they engage in, and that how one behaves sexually may not be a good measure of one's orientation or identity.

### **Violating Compulsory Heterosexuality**

Compulsory heterosexuality relies on biological assumptions about sex and gender; where the sexual pairing of men and women is assumed to be natural and any other

kind of same-sex or bi-sex sexual pairing is seen as abnormal. Compulsory heterosexuality results in a social system where all persons are assumed to be heterosexual and gender differences are taken for granted as natural. Compulsory heterosexuality is reinforced by gender norms—what we understand to be appropriately masculine or feminine. For example, rigid boundaries around femininity and masculinity, like the difference between a feminine and masculine sounding voice, are used to shore up compulsory heterosexuality. Persons who violate those rigid gender norms, like men with lilting voices or women construction workers, are often labeled by others as sexually deviant; violation of gender norms becomes a faulty tool used to predict another's sexual orientation or identity.

Another way compulsory heterosexuality is reinforced is through the internalization of heteronormative (Warner 1993) sexual scripts. Symbolic interactionists use scripting theory to show how individuals employ a prescribed set of behaviors (scripts) in their interactions with others. These scripts are learned and socially influenced. Sexual scripts are those prescribed behaviors that relate particularly to our sexual interactions. These sexual scripts are how we differentiate between an intimate sexual encounter with a romantic partner and an intimate medical encounter with a doctor, for example, whereby the former should elicit feelings of arousal and desire and the latter should not (Gagnon and Simon 1973). Heteronormative sexual scripts reinforce dominant ideas about sexuality, where the only acceptable sexual behavior, desires, or feelings occur between members of the opposite sex. The boys and young men whose experiences are detailed in this analysis recount stories of being marked by others or by themselves for violating compulsory heterosexuality via non-normative gender behavior or straying from heteronormative sexual scripts.

Fausto Sterling (2000) argues that gender is such a central organizing concept that children recognize gender differences long before they recognize sex differences. Yet sexuality, as Foucault (1990) explains, exists “as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (p. 103). In order for sexuality to be a point of power, gender—masculinity and femininity—must be particularly salient within the framework of normative sexuality because one's gender becomes inextricably linked to one's sexual behavior. Sexuality is so seamlessly attached to gender and buoyed by heteronormativity that for young boys particularly, those who come off as unmasculine in behavior, appearance, or affect are quickly policed by family and peers for being sexually deviant. Similarly, some boys internalize notions of compulsory heterosexuality through various forms of social control and therefore decide for themselves that their same-sex sexual desires or fantasies are proof that they are different from other boys. Thirteen out of the eighteen boys in my study describe this experience as having always known they were different (Trolden 1979 refers to this as sensitization). The youths made meaning of these violations of compulsory heterosexuality and the resulting gender policing they experienced, by describing them as the characteristics that make them gay. This is important because ostensibly there are many gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals who do not share this narrative of difference, perhaps due to the fact that nothing about their affect or behavior led others to suspect they were *not* heterosexual. Described by Garfinkel (1967) as the documentary method of interpretation, by the



time these young men are telling me their story, they are already claiming a gay, bisexual, or queer identity, therefore when asked to look back on their childhood and when they first realized they were gay, many of them identify this difference as being a logical explanation for their gayness.

Miguel, a Mexican immigrant who is 20 years old and identifies as a gay man has only recently started coming to Spectrum. He came out to his friends and father in high school but he says he always knew there was something different about him. Miguel's coming out process happened in the United States in the context of an urban high school, but the following description is from his childhood in Mexico, where he was marked as a young boy for not being appropriately masculine:

Like my voice...my voice was really, um, high pitched. I did sound like a girl. But that doesn't mean they had to give me, they used to label me, "Oh you little girl, you little this." Name calling. Being beaten you know, because maybe the sound of my voice didn't go with my boy body you know? And maybe that's why I got picked on.

Jamil, a multi-racial, 17-year-old boy, identifies his sexuality as open or bisexual and had been coming to Spectrum for about 9 months at the time of his interview. He came out as bisexual in middle school. Like Miguel, he also experienced policing of his gendered behavior from his young uncles who pressured him to participate in masculine activities like football, about which he says "wasn't ever my thing." He was also teased and bullied in elementary and middle school by peers for not conforming to a typical masculine gender:

I went through a lot as a kid. I was struggling with, like, depression; I was facing bullying, and, like, being tormented for being the weird kid basically all the time. It was just, like, elementary school, like, no, middle school was worse. Like there were some days where people would be nice to me but there'd always be that kid that would always be, "Oh, you're fruity and blah, blah, blah, and your voice is really high and blah, blah, blah..."

The previous examples show a violation of compulsory heterosexuality by embodying physical traits that go against gender norms like having a high pitched voice or "acting fruity." But for some boys, their first reckoning of being gay or bisexual came when they realized that their sexual desires and fantasies did not fit a heteronormative script and therefore they internalized shame and anxiety about their same-sex attraction. They too were marked as different, except they were marking themselves rather than being marked by others. For example, they recounted stories of looking at heterosexual pornography as young boys and being more interested in the men than the women. Alex, a white, 20 year old gay male who had recently come out and had been coming to Spectrum for a little more than a month told me that he did not like himself when he was younger. When I asked him why he told me this story:

I always knew there was something different about me. Like—and this is just the way it is, like, I'm not a weirdo—but when I was younger like...all of like...even when I was really young, ...say we were watching Power Rangers,

they (his brother and cousins) would always be checking out the girls, and I would be like oh, look at the guys. Like Brittany Spears, I was like, I love her music, she's pretty, but I love her music more. So I mean I always knew something was different but I was ashamed kind of?

Brian, a white, 21-year-old, queer-identified youth came out to his parents and started coming to Spectrum when he was in 7th grade. In the following example, he describes how his behavior with his first girlfriend, whom he was dating when he came out, did not conform to a heteronormative script and therefore became one of the clues to his understanding of himself as queer:

We were like cuddling on the couch in my basement and I remember her being the one, kind of...you know, little spoon, big spoon? She was the big spoon of the cuddle kind of. And then she kind of said, "You know, actually, you're supposed to be like, have your arm around me and whatnot." And I'm like, "Oh, ok, like...That felt more comfortable like, your being the more, you know, dominant one." So, I think that was another wake up call for me, you know?

Neither Alex nor Brian recounted being bullied or teased for gender non-conforming behavior the way Miguel and Jamil did, but they both described being aware of their desire violating heterosexual scripts and therefore internalizing a sense of being different or of somehow doing it wrong when comparing their behavior or feelings with that of their friends or siblings.

In addition to gender non-normativity and violating heteronormative scripts, some of the youths were ostracized for reasons that were unclear to them but which I argue were likely due to the fact that simply being queer, as in "odd" or "weird," is enough to trigger exclusion based on the raced, classed, and gendered aspects of compulsory heterosexuality. This is best demonstrated by two brothers, both of whom told stories of being outcasts at their school. Ben and William describe themselves as multi-racial, and are 19 and 16 respectively; both identify as gay and attended Catholic elementary school before moving to a public charter middle school. They have been regulars at Spectrum for about 2 years. Both of them described being outcasts during their time at Catholic school, yet when I asked them why, neither of them was able to tell me for certain. From their perspective, they were picked on for no good reason. William explains:

Okay so basically you know how there's always that one kid, that outlier there who basically would, who basically had friends but even then sometimes the friends would talk shit about him just to make themselves feel better about themselves? Basically, I was that kid that got shitted on by everybody. Even the teachers were, like, so rude to me.

Neither of them exhibit particularly non-masculine characteristics, those typical markers like a high-pitched voice or disinterest in masculine activities that other youth embody. They both described being picked on by students and teachers alike for no good reason and described this harassment escalating to physical violence at one point or another. Further along in my interview with William, I asked him about

a period in his life during elementary school when he described a turning point in his understanding of himself. He says he realized:

That I wasn't exactly like everybody else and when I found out that it was, that the reason was because I was gay, that was like the point where I'm like, really? I, and I had basically just given up on school.

Although at the time it was happening William did not experience his bullying as being a result of violating compulsory heterosexuality, he retroactively identified that he was being teased because he was gay. Whether or not they were actually bullied because of their gender performance is less important to my argument than understanding that both Ben and William experienced being singled out for being "different" and then they later identified this difference as proof of their gayness. Framing the notion of having always known one was different as violating compulsory heterosexuality is important in order to understand how boundaries of queerness shift, a point that I discuss in the conclusion.

For William and Ben, the bullying they experienced for being different kicked off a series of events that led to them moving from a Catholic school to a public school where queer-identified and racially diverse kids were quite common, which then led to an experience many of the youths in my study shared—seeking an explanation for their difference.

### Seeking an Explanation

As demonstrated above, once a young person is marked as "different" either by others or by oneself, they begin to seek out an explanation for why this might be the case and begin to associate their difference with a queer sexuality. Therefore they look for something to call themselves, a way to name what makes them different from others. It is through this "automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1995, p. 201) that the youths become naively complicit in their marginalization as they clearly understand themselves to be outside the norm or dominant culture. This process takes place at various times in youths' lives. For the boys in this study, it has happened at a rather early age as they hear others, friends or family, use words that directly or indirectly describe what they are experiencing, words like "gay," "faggot," and "homo." Several of the youths describe how at first they do not have the language to name what they are feeling.

Aaron, a Mexican-American, 19-year-old gay man who had only recently discovered Spectrum explained it this way:

Like, let's see, I had known something was different in elementary school. Um, but I never...I never called myself gay. It was, you know, because it was too early and I didn't know what it was, or because I just didn't have the experience to say that.

Others, like Alex, experienced a more visceral moment of hearing a homophobic slur, asking what it means, then making the connection that the word describes the desire they have experienced. I asked him when it was that he knew what gay was:

I...probably like 13. And um...um it was just more like my family would like once in awhile—they weren't big on it—but they'd say like "He's so gay," or "He's a faggot." Stuff like that. And like all the time that I was agreeing—like I was the agree-er—but I actually asked, I was like, "What's gay?" Finally I asked, I was like, "What do you mean?" He's all, "It's just this nasty person who likes to sleep with uh the same"...uh like he said it's...the way he said it is, "It's this nasty guy who sleeps with another guy." That's all he said... And I'm like oh my god. Okay. And I was like I wanted to dig more. So I was like, "Well, what's wrong with it?" And he was like, "Well, I don't know, they're just attracted to the same sex." And I was like oh shit, that's me...like a male that is attracted to a male. And I was like oh god, I look at males more than I do girls. That makes me gay.

Gabe, an 18-year-old Latino, bisexual man, describes being attracted to both boys and girls from early puberty but prior to this moment had only dated girls. It was not until he had been introduced to the idea of bisexuality through his peer group that he came out as bisexual:

Um it kind of start...like, thoughts going through my mind, um, during the end of elementary school, the beginning of middle school. And so, it's just, like, in the back of my mind I always thought, like, "No, this isn't how it's supposed go. I shouldn't be thinking about guys that way, I should think about girls this way only." And it's just like, um, so, like, during middle school I was kind of, like, fighting myself on it a lot but when I started high school and I got a chance to meet a whole lot of new people who were a part of the GLBT community, considering [my high school] was filled with so many, it just gave me a chance to just, like, stop and think and, like, be true to myself, like, true to myself, like, slap myself, "This is reality for you."

Although prior to encountering the term "bisexual" and other members of the LGBT community, Gabe was experiencing same-sex desire, it was not until he was exposed to the idea through peers that he was able to name his experience, claim it as his own, and then begin exploring intimacy with male-identified persons.

This process of seeking an explanation for being different demonstrates the hegemonic power of compulsory heterosexuality. In contrast to domination, where individuals are forced to conform to a norm, the power of hegemonic social control lies in the way that the dominant group "by virtue of its moral and intellectual leadership secures the voluntary consent of the masses" (Kim 2001). In the case of sexuality, heterosexual persons are interpreted to be normal and morally superior to same-sex or bi-sex oriented individuals, not just by heterosexual individuals themselves, but by non-heterosexual people as well who then understand their sexuality as abnormal. Compulsory heterosexual norms are reproduced through various cultural mediums and used to police gendered and/ or sexual behavior. Society is bombarded with heteronormative images in movies, television shows, novels, songs, fables, children's stories, advertising, and more, all of which suggests to queer youth day in and day out that their sexual desires and behaviors are wrong. Compulsory heterosexuality has erased any and all understanding of same-sex or

bi-sex orientation and desire as a normal, healthy occurrence in human sexuality. More importantly, it ensures that those who do not fit the dominant norm will internalize this difference as their own fault and manage their behavior in a way that reproduces the heterosexual as “normal.” Homonormativity within the LGBT rights movement, “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them,” (Duggan 2003, p. 50) is a reaction to the hegemonic power of compulsory heterosexuality. At the same time, as tolerance and awareness of LGBT-identified individuals and issues increases, youth are being exposed to new examples of queerness in their day-to-day lives. I saw this happen with the youths who all attended the same public charter school where being queer was clearly safe and supported not only by peers but by the teachers and administrators as well.

What follows is sexual exploration where they boys begin to investigate various aspects of being gay or bisexual through intimate or social encounters.

### Exploring Sexuality

Feeling somewhat liberated by the recognition of themselves as gay or bisexual, some of the boys in my study pursued relationships with known gay or bisexual persons as a step towards embracing their sexuality. Through these explorations and relationships they learned how to appropriately “be” queer.

Anthony, a 17-year-old Latino gay male who had been coming to Spectrum since he was 14 refers to his first boyfriend as a mentor, someone who helped him navigate the “gay world”:

Um, my last relationship that I thought I was in love with somebody, it was with a guy named Thomas. And he uh...this was back when I first—or not first came out—but like a year after I’d first come out. And he was kind of like my mentor in the gay world, showing me the ropes, getting me used to it, being my right-hand man as for comfort. So we got in a relationship and we got close. And it wasn’t a long relationship, but him practically being my mentor in the GLBT community...

Miguel, like Anthony, also sought an out, gay boy in high school to date. Although he does not refer to his first boyfriend as a mentor the way Anthony does, his explanation for why he pursued him suggests that he admired this boy for being out and proud about his sexuality and was wanting to emulate that himself:

Mary: Was he...was he out and gay at school too?

Miguel: Um yeah.

Mary: Were you out at school?

Miguel: Actually no. Oh this is good...this is a good question. I was not out, and he was. And he was like the perfect model of everything that I wanted to embrace...Me dating without having to worry about anybody judging me. And if they were judging me, I didn’t care. And I wanted that.

Mary: Yeah. So he was boldly out.

Miguel: Yeah...

Mary: But that was attractive to you 'cause you couldn't be that?

Miguel: Yeah. And I was like, I want that so bad. I am here hiding of myself...you know from myself. And oh, suffering. And he's living the life that I wish I had.

Later, after Miguel broke up with this boyfriend and met his current boyfriend, the roles were reversed. He was now the out and proud gay boy and his new boyfriend was the one who was shy and afraid to be "out" in public. Then it was Miguel's turn to be the mentor.

While Anthony, and Miguel found that being in same-sex relationships were a good fit and enjoyed being gay, for some young people sexual exploration comes less easily. Some of the youths, like Ben describes below, may have understood themselves to be gay or bisexual, yet were not as eager to explore being sexual with others. Sometimes the youths have sex because they think they have to, not because they are experiencing strong desire. Ben's first sexual experience is an example of this kind of sex. When I asked him if he was sexually active he said he was not currently, but he had lost his virginity with a friend during his senior year of high school. He explains:

Um it was with a friend. People kept...people kept saying that we should get together and um it...it got to the point where we were like okay. We were like we're going to do it once.

In the end, Ben was not that impressed with his first sexual experience. He was in fact rather dismissive about it and has not had sex since.

Discourses about adolescent sexuality often assume that young people have sex because they cannot help themselves; they are slave to unbridled emotions and hormones. Ben's story contradicts this idea. The assumptions that all adolescents want to have sex and that their sexual behavior aligns with their orientation and identity perpetuates essentialist ideas about sexuality and mask the often hidden processes (particularly within heterosexual intimacies) that show sexuality to be a more complicated, learned process. Ben's first sexual encounter, like so many first times, did not quite go right and points to the idea that sex is in many ways an "acquired taste" (Whisman 1996, p. 32).

Further, these discourses put pressure on young people to attach themselves to a sexual identity. Many of the boys I interviewed identified themselves as virgins, something Weinberg also found to be true in his study *On 'Doing' and 'Being' Gay*, "Some people may label themselves as homosexual in the absence of any same-sex sexual experiences" (1978, p. 148). Although it is true that some were not encountering opportunities to have sex, others were dating and had plenty of opportunities but chose not to. This is important because it demonstrates that being gay or bisexual, much like being heterosexual, is not dependent upon actually having sex, yet discourses about gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons universally depend upon assumptions about individual's intimate, sexual behavior. In other words, debates about homosexuality and bisexuality give disproportionate weight to sexual behavior forcing gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals to account for their

sexuality in a way straight individuals never do. Among the boys and men I interviewed, this complicates their process of sexual development because they feel pressure to align their orientation, behavior, and identity, pressure that comes both from outside and inside the LGBT community. As demonstrated in the following section, the youths struggle to find an identity that accurately describes them. There seems to be significant pressure to choose a sexual identity, yet the youths are often ambiguous about what that identity is. Further, it is important to recognize that the negotiating of sexual identity is deeply influenced by the context of young people's social and cultural circles; in this case that social context includes Spectrum, their schools, families, neighborhoods, and more.

### Negotiating Identity

In his book *The New Gay Teenager*, Savin-Williams (2005) argues that young people today are less invested in sexual orientation and identity as compared to pre-Millennial generations. While it is certainly the case that the youths at Spectrum identify themselves in a multitude of ways and seem less attached explicitly to mono-sexuality,<sup>2</sup> it was not consistent with my findings that identity did not matter to them. In fact, the very increase in the variety of sexual and gender identity labels evidences that identity matters more than ever among this group of youths. Membership within Spectrum and the larger LGBT community is dependent primarily upon one's sexual and secondarily, gender, identities. When asked to name their sexual identity, youth replied with such labels as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual, demi-sexual, universal, open, and straight, but they were never unprepared to answer. Often, when asked about their gender identity youth either had to ask for clarification or mistakenly substituted a sexual identity, simply because acknowledgement of gender identity among cisgender people is less common (although this is changing as transgender issues are brought to the forefront of the movement). As I discuss further in my conclusion, the boundaries of identity may be expanding, but sexual, and to a lesser degree gender, identities are still salient, meaningful terms among young people in U.S. culture, although not all sexual and gender identities are viewed with the same legitimacy.

While youths arrive at Spectrum thinking they might be gay, lesbian or bisexual, once there, they are exposed through peers and workshops to ideas about sexuality and gender existing on a spectrum and that there are a multitude of ways to identify oneself, including queer and pansexual. They also learn about the history of the LGBT rights movement and about queer culture like drag and Pride. All of this starts to affect the way they see themselves in the world. Dank (1971), Troiden (1979), and Weinberg (1978), in their work on homosexual identity development, all assert the importance of shifting meanings of homosexuality and inviting contexts—such as a gay community—as necessary components to adopting a homosexual identity. Dank explains in 1971, “The cognitive category of

<sup>2</sup> I use the term mono-sexuality in contrast to bisexuality. Terms such as heterosexuality and homosexuality indicate mono-sexuality and contribute to the myth that sexuality is a binary where one can only be attracted to the same or the opposite sex but not both.

homosexual is now being presented in a not unfavorable manner to hundreds of thousands of people who previously could not have been exposed to such information... a higher proportion of those with homosexual desires and behavior will develop a homosexual identity, and the development of that identity will continue to occur at an increasingly younger age” (p. 194). I think my research shows this expansion of homosexuality as more favorable than it once was along with an earlier acquisition of a sexual minority identity. My observations at Spectrum made it clear to me that youth today have more options than previous generations when it comes to understanding their sexuality. They have exploded the number of labels one can attach to sexuality and embrace sexuality as a fluid, not fixed part of their experience. Yet, I do not interpret this expansion of options to mean sexual identity does not matter, rather I see it as evidence that sexual identity has become important enough in society that the terms used to describe it have expanded in order to better describe individual lived experience.

Anthony spoke to me about how much he loves being gay: that his sexual identity is the most important part of his identity, the only part of his identity he really cares about (compared to things like race or gender). He associates being gay with a particular type of personality or culture:

Um, I guess being at Spectrum, and being around peers that have...that are in...that are, um, allies to the community and also part of the community, so gays, lesbians, bi's, and all of them...they're fun-loving people. So I've sort of taken myself as part of that community. So I see myself as a fun-loving, happy person. So that being in my sexuality base is kind of like a...it's grown on me. So I kind of like how it feels. So for me being gay is really fun to me.

Anthony's description of the queer community belies one of the dominant discourses about LGBT youth as depressed and suicidal, raising an important point about the counter-hegemonic role LGBT centers and communities play in U.S. society. Finding a queer-friendly place like Spectrum was described as a pivotal moment for almost all of the participants in this study because they could finally let go of trying to make themselves fit into a heteronormative culture and instead find a place of belonging that was not only fun but something to be proud of.

In addition to exposing youths to pride for gay culture, Spectrum has a regular six-week sex education program that is funded by a federal grant, supervised through a public health organization, and facilitated by peer-educators and adult staff. During the first session, the youths learn about the difference between sexual orientation, identity, and behavior as well as biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression, focusing on how these things (biological sex, sexuality and gender) exist on a spectrum and do not determine one another. During one session, Cesar, a twenty-something, Latino, gay male staff member who is deeply admired by all of the youths who attend Spectrum, used his own experience with the sex/gender spectrum to explain that while he had spent most of his life understanding himself as gay and only attracted to men, he had recently had moments where he found himself attracted to butch individuals who were not necessarily cisgender men. Therefore, his feeling was that he was more attracted to masculinity than to men and therefore perhaps he was not as gay as he once thought he was.



Travon, a 16 year old, black, male has spent a lot of time at Spectrum and has been influenced by these ideas about gender fluidity and queerness: ideas that suggest our sexuality and our gender exist on a continuum rather than being fixed and that they can change over time. When I asked Travon what his sexual identity is, he answered that he identifies as queer so I asked him to explain that to me:

Well, um, I did actually do it for a couple of different reasons. I was like, I was, I was in the time of my life where I, like, when I originally came out I was bi, I came out only as bi. And then I realized I like guys better so I said I was gay. And then I started having reoccurring feelings for women so I went back to being bi and I was like this is too much work, I identify as queer, it covers it all and it also doesn't exclude people like trans people and stuff and, like, I felt that it was a lot cooler to include everybody cause I'm not trying to build walls, like if I like you then I'm going like you.

In some cases, the youths acknowledge the ways their sexual identity intersects with their other identities. Ernie, a 21-year-old Chicano youth who identifies as both gender and sexual queer has been coming to Spectrum for several years. As he explains what being queer means to him, notice that it says as much about his race and class as it does his sexuality:

I like to call myself queer just cause it's, like, more, like, fluid, like, it's very fluid, like, you're not set to a standard or anything. So, like, I dunno, like, people wanna be like 'oh you're bisexual' but it's not, it's like past that, it's like another level...It's more fluid still...I would date a girl, or a woman identified person...and I've dated a man, like it just, that wouldn't matter to me. So that's one part of it and then just like also being a person of color and then also somebody who's like poor, and just stuff like that.

Ernie expresses a queer-of-color (Ferguson 2004) perspective, that being gay is not the only thing that makes him queer. Queerness becomes a marker for all the ways one does not fit into mainstream ideas of what is "normal." Even though Ernie was a youth leader at Spectrum during my time there, and an active member of the queer youth community at large, he felt rejected and alienated by the mainstream LGBT rights movement, a movement he described as "gay" in contrast to "queer." In the Resource, the LGBT community center that houses Spectrum, Ernie saw a white, gay, cisgender, heteronormative agenda; an agenda that did not embrace his queer, brown, and poor identity. It was understood among Weinberg's (1978) research participants several decades ago, that to be queer had little to do with who you were having sex with, rather queers were those men who dressed or acted in a feminine manner. Once the men in his study figured out that being homosexual did not necessarily mean giving up their masculinity, they were more likely to embrace a homosexual identity. Among my research participants 35 years later, the boundaries of queer have expanded beyond gender non-normativity to include people of color, poor and working class people, immigrants, fat people, and people with disabilities, many of whom do not see themselves represented in the mainstream LGBT movement and exist in contrast to homonormativity.

Religion can be another identity that intersects with one's sexuality. Matthew, a 21 year old white gay male who has been coming to Spectrum since he was 16, understands himself to be gay and engages in same-sex behavior with men but struggles with what it means to be Catholic and gay. He talked at length about how it was his understanding that the Catholic Church was not against being gay so much as against engaging in same-sex intimacy. In other words, one could be same-sex oriented and gay identified but was expected to see sex with men as immoral and therefore avoid that behavior. His recounts his struggle with identity here:

I remember being ...14, 15 and really struggling with the (gay) identity and whatnot, like, I don't know why I'm this way or whatever, but by the time I reached um 17, 16 ½, 17, I really, um, feel like I came more into, like, acceptance, you know? And like, um, just this is who I am you know? Or part of me or this is my orientation. Um, it's been the last three years that I've, um, had to reface this kind of struggle between not necessarily who I am or what it is, but you know, is it moral or not? Like, I've had to question that now.

In these examples, Ernie's queer identity and Matthew's struggle with being gay, are less about "who you do" and more about "who you are." Sexual identity is a statement. It can be a political stance or a site of resistance, but it can also be a stigma, even within the sexual minority community, particularly if it does not fit a heteronormative (mono-sexual) framework. And sexual identity is part of an assemblage (Puar 2005) of identity, identities that are not necessarily fixed but moving and shifting within a powerful social context. Too often, various identities like race, gender, class, and sexuality are assumed to have stable meanings, but in fact meanings and interpretations shift depending on where and when they are being deployed. Puar argues that it is these experiential ways of knowing that may have more to do with one's cultural and temporal location than one's association with various prescribed identities (Robertson and Sgoutas 2012).

Identity is rarely fixed among the youths of Spectrum, pointing to the process of negotiating sexual identity, orientation, and behavior. Youths often describe switching back and forth from bisexual to straight to gay and back again. But, even as the youths are becoming more open to identities like queer and pansexual, many of them are still driven to settle on a mono-sexual identity, which is likely evidence of the LGBT movement's own hegemonic power. Even as sexual and gender identities among the youth proliferate, the mainstream LGBT movement is still in thrall with a homonormative image of themselves. It is harder to be seen as an authentic member of the LGBT community with a pan-sexual or bisexual identity and the battle for LGBT rights still center around heteronormative goals like marriage. Certainly within the larger, non-queer society, where tolerance for same-sex relationships and intimacy seems to be growing, little is ever said about where bisexual and pansexual persons fit into the conversation because these forms of sexuality resist the boundaries of identities like straight, gay, and lesbian. And identities driven by race, class, country of origin, ability, size, and more, are all interrelated with what it means to be queer. It remains to be seen whether or not the queer youth of today will manage to carry this proliferation of identity forward into adulthood. It is from this point of departure that I will conclude with a discussion of

the impact these findings have among the community of youth at Spectrum as well as the larger sexual and gender minority community.

## Conclusion

The youth of Spectrum do not have the privilege of writing off their identity as no longer important, like Savin-Williams suggests is the province of the new gay teenager. Almost three decades ago, Rubin (1984) predicted that the “charmed circle” of acceptable sexuality would broaden to include more individuals, but that it would fail to achieve a truly democratic acceptance of sexuality in all its diversity. Rubin likened the growing acceptance of some sexualities along with the continued exclusion of others to racism. This idea that sexuality is a tool for boundary-making operates quite like race in the twenty-first century U.S. where we live not in an era of post-racism, but rather amidst a shift in the boundaries of whiteness (Gans 1999; Lee and Bean 2004; Steinberg 2004). I am not suggesting that sexual identity and race are equal identity categories, but rather that as focal points of U.S. rights movements, efforts have only succeeded in shifting boundaries, not eliminating them.

The boys and men discussed in this article and the youth who attend Spectrum in general, are not embraced as members of the dominant culture, but it may not be just because of their sexual identity. They are excluded because they are queer in multiple ways: they embody non-normative gender traits; are black, Latino, and bi- or multi-racial; come from working class and impoverished families who are struggling to make ends meet or are homeless; are failing or dropping out of school; suffer from learning disabilities and have been labeled with various mental health conditions; are outsiders, geeks, nerds. It is this assemblage of identity, not simply being gay or lesbian, that have a profound impact on the experiences of these young people. No matter how much access the mainstream LGBT rights movement accomplishes with its current liberal strategies, the youth of Spectrum will likely continue to exist outside of its boundaries.

It is not the case that in the future it will cease to matter whether or not one is gay, straight, bisexual or something else, but instead, being gay in a way that does not violate compulsory heterosexuality and its gendered, raced, and classed formations, will allow access to the privileges that have thus far been denied most sexual minorities. While the boundaries might shift outward to allow a few more individuals into the charmed circle, without a paradigmatic shift in how we understand sexuality, it will continue to be a powerfully productive tool for drawing those social boundaries in the first place. Individuals like the young boys in this study, whose sexuality is inevitably attached to their gendered, classed, and raced identities, will continue to have a harder time breaking through. Similarly, others who violate compulsory heterosexuality, including sex workers, the non-monogamous, the “promiscuous”, and more, will find their sexuality used against them in the shoring up of protectionist boundaries around rights in the U.S.

These findings point to two important considerations going forward. The first is the importance of youth spaces like Spectrum where young people can access

resources. Seidman (1993) argues, “Identity constructions are not disciplining and regulatory only in a self-limiting and oppressive way; they are also personally, socially, and politically enabling” (p. 134). Identity matters a lot to youth who find themselves outside of the charmed circle. It is their very queerness that has secured their access to this kin that is Spectrum, a family they rely on for support and survival. The youth of Spectrum access resources that help them to survive and succeed via their queer identities, but it is not just their sexual identities that drive their marginalization. When it comes to the safety and well-being of young people, it will be useful to pay close attention to all of the circumstances that contribute to their problems and take care that resources are not too tightly tethered to identities that are fluid, contested, and political in nature, like sexual identity. As I have demonstrated, queer identity is in many ways what is helping these youth gain access to support, but this becomes problematic when help is dependent upon authenticating that identity.

Second, in her book “Dude, You’re a Fag”, Pascoe (2007) shows how the most powerful part of the fag discourse is not that it polices actual gay individuals, but rather that it is used as a tool to reinforce masculinity by policing gender non-normative behavior and individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation. In other words, properly masculine gay men are not the targets of the fag discourse. The youths in my study were policed—either externally or internally—at a very young age, for their gender non-conformity in their behavior or sexual desires. They were teased, bullied, harassed, and tortured because they had high-pitched voices, liked to play with dolls, despised football, or preferred to hang out with girls, not because they were sexually attracted to boys. Pascoe shows that underneath homophobic and transphobic slurs and epithets lies a deeply misogynist society. Efforts to end bullying, harassment, and teasing of children and youth must, at their core, address sexism and gender inequality. While we are living in an age where racism and homophobia are ever more frequently challenged, the overt forms of sexism that plague girls, women, and queer individuals go largely unchecked.

We must continue to pursue sociological research on child and adolescent sexualities, gender identity, and gender expression. It is not enough to understand sexuality and gender through the lens of public health, medicine, and biology as both sexuality and gender are far more social products than biological ones. Further, it is important that sociological research on sexualities be counter hegemonic in that it should challenge, not take for granted, heteronormative assumptions. Research on child and adolescent sexualities has broad reaching implications in terms of how we approach sex education among children and youth, how teachers, parents, and other community leaders treat gender variance among young people, and ultimately how to create more inclusive and safer spaces for young people.

Within the well-rehearsed narrative of the coming out story lies the key to recognizing the hegemonic power of compulsory heterosexuality; it insists that youth account for all of the ways that they are different from normal, heterosexual individuals. And even in a tolerant climate where perhaps that difference is not cause for threat, the pressure to situate oneself on the homo/hetero spectrum continues to reflect a very heteronormative understanding of sexuality. Hearing youths describe their experiences with becoming sexual brings to light some of the

hidden processes of the formation of a sexual self: processes that compulsory heterosexuality often masks among straight identified persons. Compulsory heterosexuality ensures that straight identified persons are not faced with the process of questioning their sexual orientation, identity, and behavior, coming out to themselves and others, and struggling to understand why they are “different.” Yet surely, if all young people were forced to account for their sexuality the way sexual minority youth are, their stories of exploration would look similar. For example, in my *U.S. Sex, Gender, & Society* course, I have students fill out a survey that asks questions like, “When did you first come to realize you were straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or asexual?” and “Who was the first person you told about your attractions, desires, behaviors, or lack thereof?” The goal of the exercise is to demonstrate the hegemonic power of heterosexuality and in particular, how “coming out” for sexual minorities is a key component of that power. Future research on straight youths’ sexual identity development could expose more of the ways compulsory heterosexuality functions in society. Perhaps, we need to ask more straight youth, “How do you know you are *not* gay?” I suspect the answer is that they have always just known.

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